

VZCZCXYZ0000
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHAS #0066/01 0231104
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 231104Z JAN 07
FM AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2721
INFO RUEHTU/AMEMBASSY TUNIS 6438
RUEHRB/AMEMBASSY RABAT 1584
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 2054
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1492
RUEHCL/AMCONSUL CASABLANCA 2842

C O N F I D E N T I A L ALGIERS 000066

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/22/2017
TAGS: PREL PGOV FR AG
SUBJECT: FRIENDSHIP TREATY WITH FRANCE ON INDEFINITE HOLD

Classified By: DCM Thomas F. Daughton; reasons 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) French Political Counselor Francois Penguinilly told PolEc Chief over lunch January 19 that it was doubtful France and Algeria would agree to sign the long-pending Friendship Treaty between them any time soon. Penguinilly said the first obstacle to overcome was the French presidential elections in May. There was "no chance," he said, the treaty would be signed before France had a new president. As for upcoming Algerian elections, Penguinilly maintained that both the parliamentary elections planned for May and the local elections expected in October were largely irrelevant to finalizing the treaty.

FRENCH POLITICS ARE AN OBSTACLE...

¶2. (C) Penguinilly explained that Algeria originally balked at signing the treaty in winter 2005, after the French parliament adopted legislation February 23 of that year noting the positive effects of the French colonial period on Algeria's development. In reaction to the Algerian anger that followed, Penguinilly said President Chirac arranged for the French constitutional court to rule the provision invalid. That good faith effort, observed Penguinilly, was insufficient to calm the Algerian political scene. Once Chirac removed the major obstacle of the offending language, the Algerians began to erect other barriers, particularly the lengthy time needed to process visas for Algerians traveling to France.

¶3. (C) Penguinilly said that French Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy removed the visa obstacle during his November visit to Algiers. Sarkozy created an obstacle of his own, however, when he let it be known publicly and privately that the Friendship Treaty was not something he viewed favorably. Since Sarkozy at the time was already expected to be the center-right candidate for president (and has since been formally nominated), Penguinilly observed that his negative signals carried considerable weight. While Penguinilly stressed that Algerian officials privately acknowledged that Sarkozy intended his remarks for a French domestic political audience, the Friendship Treaty took yet another step back. (Note: As if to highlight the political nature of his visit, Sarkozy laid a wreath inscribed with his name but no mention of his title at the monument to those who died in the war of independence from France. Penguinilly underscored that omitting the title was entirely inconsistent with standard French protocol for such visits.)

...BUT THE ALGERIAN POLITICAL HURDLE IS GREATER

¶4. (C) Penguinilly said the source of his pessimism on fasttracking the signature of the Friendship Treaty after the upcoming French elections was the rich political dividend that beating up on the French paid in Algerian politics. He observed that after Sarkozy repaired the visa problem, the Algerians came up with other (unspecified) "excuses" to avoid finalizing the Treaty. As an example of Algerian readiness and willingness to hold up the Friendship Treaty as a symbol for French ill-treatment of Algeria, Penguinilly described how senior Algerian officials at a January 18 public forum on demining efforts said Algeria could not sign the Friendship Treaty so long as French mines left over from the colonial period were not removed. Never mind, scoffed Penguinilly, that the whole purpose of the conference was to highlight bilateral cooperation in removing the mines. Such exchanges, he underscored, made him pessimistic that the treaty would be signed any time soon.

TIME HEALS ALL WOUNDS

¶5. (C) The one bright spot, from Penguinilly's standpoint, was the January 21-22 visit of the president of the French National Assembly. Penguinilly, in advance of the visit, said the ceremonial nature of the trip would give the Friendship Treaty some momentum. Indeed, the Algerian press quoted Assembly President Jean-Louis Debre as saying during his visit that "a time will come when the treaty will be signed."

Opposition Islah MP Lakhdar Benkhellaf told us January 22 that Algerian MPs privately agreed with Debre that signing the Friendship Treaty was just a matter of time. Benkhellaf said that despite the political rhetoric, Algerians understood their country's relationship with France was special and that good relations were unavoidable. Benkhellaf quipped that Debre and Algerian officials understood that time healed all wounds, but no one wanted to place bets on how much time would pass before the wounds were healed enough to permit the Friendship Treaty's signature.

FORD